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## RELIGION AND ETHICS IN THE THOUGHT OF THE APOSTLE PAUL: GAL. 5:6

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There has been much discussion in times past of the apostle's doctrine of justification, and in late years of his eschatology and Christology. But it is doubtful whether his thought about the essential features of the religious life in its specifically Christian form has received a proportionate amount of attention. Nowhere is his thought concerning the content of religion and of morality and their mutual relations more strikingly set forth than in Gal. 5:6. But for the full apprehension of the meaning of this passage it must be interpreted in the light of its relation to the whole epistle, and especially to the remainder of the chapter in which it stands.

The Epistle to the Galatians is one of the most interesting in the whole New Testament collection. Its vivid presentation of a tense and critical situation gives it almost the quality of a drama. It is also one of the most modern, in the sense that it deals with questions that enter in principle into problems that are still of vital interest to men. It was written to a group of churches which the apostle himself had founded. These churches had been visited after the apostle's departure by Christian preachers who, holding a very different conception of Christianity from that which Paul held and preached, had nearly succeeded in persuading the Galatians to accept their view instead of the apostle's. The letter was evidently written immediately after the receipt of this very disturbing news, and had for its purpose to arrest the threatened movement in the direction of that which Paul regarded as a perverted gospel and a practical apostasy from Christ.

The letter clearly reveals to us Paul's original message in response to which the Galatians had become Christians, and the counter

argument of the perverting preachers, as well as Paul's reply to their argument.

The Galatians were Gentiles and Paul's converts were made from among idol-worshippers. Paul himself was a Jew, a Jew who believed in Jesus as the Christ, but still a Jew. But his message to the Galatians did not include an invitation to become Jewish proselytes, or to put themselves under the yoke of the Jewish law. He preached to them a living and true God, as against the idols that they had worshiped; he announced to them Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, crucified on behalf of sinners, and risen from the dead; and he exhorted them to believe in Christ as the Savior of men. But he did not enjoin circumcision, or the keeping of the Sabbath or the other sacred days of the Jews, nor did he enforce his exhortation to morality by appeal to the authority of the Old Testament law. It was a religion of the Spirit, and a morality grounded in this religion, that he preached and the Galatians accepted.

To those who came after Paul in Galatia this teaching was fatally defective. They were conscientious legalists, who believed that the will of God was expressed in the statutes of the Old Testament, and that divine approval was to be gained by strict obedience to these statutes. Approaching the Galatians at what was perhaps their most susceptible point of attack, they had induced them to take up the observance of days and weeks and months. Simultaneously with their successful efforts in this direction, or successively, but up to the writing of the letter at least unsuccessfully, they had endeavored to persuade the Galatians to accept circumcision. It is not difficult to reproduce their argument. The Christ whom Paul preached was sent to the covenant people of God, and in fulfilment of promises made to them. Participation in the covenant was conditioned, so the Old Testament clearly taught, on the acceptance of circumcision (Gen. 17:1-14). It was easy to allege that Paul's gospel was a tower without a foundation, the end without the beginning. Faith was good, but in the order of personal experience circumcision comes before faith, and after it comes obedience to law.

The doctrine of legalism Paul himself had once held; but while

to his opponents faith in Jesus was but an appendix to the really fundamental part of their religion, which was legalistic through and through, the experience which had led Paul to become a believing disciple, and eventually an apostle of Christ, had led him also to the total rejection of legalism.

Into the intricacies of the arguments on both sides, which disclose themselves to the careful student of this letter, it is not the purpose of this paper to enter. Suffice it to say that *in principle* the conflict was between a religion of authority, i.e., the authority of the past as expressed in sacred books and the tradition of the church, and the religion of experience including even that of living men; *in substance* the issue was between a religion fundamentally physical and a religion essentially spiritual and ethical. It is this latter aspect of the matter which is clearly set forth in the pregnant utterance of Gal. 5:6, "In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love." It is the exposition of this sentence that is the specific task of this paper.

"*In Christ Jesus*": The phrase is characteristically Pauline. Jesus Christ was for Paul the image of God, the Son of God, toward whom faith in God is directed, in whom it finds its object, and in fellowship with whom man enters into fellowship with God. So intimate is the relation of the believer with Christ that to speak of Christ as living in the believer and the believer in Christ, is to use language none too strong for the apostle's thought. We may perhaps paraphrase the expression in the words, "in the religion of Jesus Christ," or "to the believer in Christ Jesus," but neither phrase quite adequately interprets it.

"*Neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision*": That the apostle affirms the valuelessness of circumcision to the believer in Christ illustrates how thoroughly he had repudiated the legalistic principle and the authority of the Old Testament strictly interpreted. For, as already pointed out, the Old Testament distinctly states that circumcision is the seal of the covenant between God and his people and that he who will not receive it shall be cut off from his people because he hath broken God's covenant (Gen. 17:14). Back of all the statutes for which the name

of Moses stood voucher, and presupposed in them all, was this rite, which went back even to the days of Abraham, where it had been made the indispensable and perpetual seal of God's covenant of grace. Yet for Paul not only had this primal rite become without authority; he could even declare that the acceptance of it by a Gentile was a denial of Christ and severance of relation to him. (Cf. vs. 2.)

But the apostle adds, "nor uncircumcision." Repudiation of the statute, in itself, then, has no value. Rejection of authority has no virtue; this lies in what takes its place. In itself anti-legalism is as unavailing as legalism.

"*But faith*": In this we reach the positive element of the apostle's assertion, and one of the most central terms of his thought. What then is faith? Taken in its lowest terms, in its simplest form, stripped of all that is local or temporary, it is the practical acceptance of that which authenticates itself as the will and thought of God. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness"; and to this assertion of the Old Testament the apostle appeals in more than one epistle to show the antiquity of the revelation of faith as the basis of the divine approval. The actual content, intellectually speaking, of Abraham's faith is of so little consequence that no reference is made to it. What came to him with the assurance on his part that it was from God, to this he yielded assent of mind and will. Openness of mind to the divine revelation, whatever its content, and response of will—this is faith.

If this be faith, one cannot doubt that it has existed in many a land, in many an age—shall we dare to say, in every land, in every age? The sheik of the desert who became the pattern of faith and the Father of the Faithful is not the only man that has had an open mind and a responsive will; nor did the apostle think that Abraham was a solitary example of faith. The class of those who "by patient continuance in good works seek for glory and honor and incorruption" is not an imaginary one in his thought, nor is it confined to men of Abrahamic descent.

But if this be faith according to its fundamental nature, it is evident that it must be capable of ever-enlarging horizon, and of demanding ever larger response of will. In particular, if Jesus is

the Son of God, the image of God, in whom we see the light of the glory of God, faith confronted by that revelation must accept this also, and the soul must respond and the life become conformed to the demand which such revelation makes. If moreover this revelation be made not only, as it was to the Twelve, in the Christ that walked in Galilee and suffered in Jerusalem, but in the ever-living Spirit of Christ, which is the Spirit of God, and if with this Spirit of Christ there be possible a fellowship of the human spirit, which purifies, inspires, and empowers, then faith may grow, and ought to grow, into such fellowship, so that he who believes may say, as Paul said, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ that liveth in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith upon the Son of God." This is what faith had become for Paul. Doubtless the language is the language of one in whom there was something of the spirit of the mystic. But we cannot doubt that the experience was real, in Paul's case and in many another. However touched with emotion may be the language in which the believer speaks of his faith, however vague the definition of it in his mind, the experience itself still conforms to the fundamental idea of faith. It is the purpose and effort to assimilate in thought and life that which comes to the soul bringing with it the assurance that it is the revelation of God.

But where, on this conception of faith, it may be asked, is the soul's guarantee against misinterpretation or even deception? How can it be assured that the seeming revelation is really such, or that its meaning is what it seems to be? Absolute guarantee, it must be answered, there is none. The manifoldness of the interpretations that have been put upon the life and teaching of Christ are sufficient evidence of this. Even the Twelve whom Jesus chose to be his most trusted companions but imperfectly apprehended him. Faith does not give infallibility. It cannot guarantee the correctness of each believer's interpretation of his experience. But neither is its religious effectiveness, or its right to be, dependent on such correctness. If, as in the apostle's day, the fruit of faith is seen in love, joy, and peace, these strongly testify that it has, however mysteriously, laid hold upon the deep realities of life, the sources of power in life.

*"Working through love"*: The joining of faith and love is not particularly unusual; but the apostle has nowhere else set them in precisely the relation which this phrase implies. And at first sight there is something paradoxical in this relation. *Faith* is the attitude of the soul toward God and his revelation of himself. By *love* the apostle doubtless means an attitude toward men: for a little later in this chapter he enjoins the Galatians "by love to serve one another," and adds that all the law is fulfilled in one word, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. To love is then to recognize the fact that the welfare of others is as really a thing of value as one's own, and to desire to promote that welfare equally with one's own. It is the losing of one's individual self in the larger social self; not the ignoring of one's own well-being, as if it were of no consequence; for if it be not of value, then that of others is also worthless; but the devotion of one's self to the welfare of one's community, be that community large or small. It is in such love as this that Paul finds the solution of all the ethical problems of life. We are one body; let each live as a member of the body, seeking the welfare of the body, not each member his own.

But love, the apostle implies, is the product of faith, and through it faith finds expression. For this is the meaning of the words, "faith working through love." Though the expression is unusual, the apostle's own statements about faith and love suggest the explanation. Faith so allies the soul of the believer with Christ that it is no longer he that lives but Christ that lives in him. But the principle of Jesus' life is love, as the apostle repeatedly declares; love must then become dominant in the life of the believer also. It comes to the same thing when in 5:22 the apostle sets forth first in the list of those things that constitute the fruit of the Spirit, love. For the life of faith in Christ is a life of fellowship with the Spirit, the life of one who lives by the Spirit (vs. 25), is led by the Spirit (vs. 18), walks by the Spirit (vss. 16, 25). Faith, therefore, as the apostle here conceives of it, is the radical element of the life of the Christian; from this root, or rather, from the union of the soul with God which it effects, there springs that love which is itself first among the fruits of the Spirit, and becomes in turn the root and source of the others. "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy,

peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control." And these things cannot but be found in the life of him in whose soul there is the faith that works through love.

This then is the apostle's conception of the Christian life: a soul open to the fulness of God's revelation of himself; a life transfused with, and transformed by, the sense of fellowship with the God whose love toward men and whose will respecting men have been supremely revealed in Jesus Christ; a life of loving service of one's fellow-men, of devotion to their welfare, which finds its source and its inspiration in this sense of fellowship with him who is the supreme member of the body of which we all are parts.

But is such a life practicable in this day and age of the world? We shall readily grant that it is superior to the other two types of life of which the apostle speaks in this chapter, the life controlled by the passions of the flesh, and the life under law. Even though, with the apostle, we take the term flesh as standing not simply for the appetites that find their seat and stimulus in the animal nature, but as including all the forces that we comprehend under the term selfishness, yet it is still true that the works of the flesh are debasing and degrading, and that he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption. Nor can it be thought that the highest type of human life is achieved by the endeavor to obey a code of rules, however complete and lofty these rules may be. Legalism has its elements of strength; it is vastly superior to the life of surrender to the impulses of the flesh. Yet there is something far better than legalism. To Paul, who had lived a life of such perfection as is attainable under legalism, the entrance into the life in Christ was an emergence from the darkness of slavery into the light of freedom. The ideal life is not one of bondage, either to the impulses to evil that are a part of our inheritance from the past history of the race, or even to a code of laws however good. There must be in it an element of spontaneity and freedom; it must be the joyous expression of an energy that has its source and perennial spring within, a power divine, yet resident in the soul itself.

But the question arises, and it is a natural one, whether civilization and organized society do not demand of the individual that

he shall conform his conduct to certain common rules of action, and that he follow these even when they do not seem to be expressive of any general moral principle. Does he not then of necessity come again under law? This is certainly true; and it is one of the first things that a man impelled by the spirit of love and seeking to serve the community will discover. Even aside from those things which are in themselves necessary to the good of the community, such as truthfulness, honesty in commercial transactions and in the payment of taxes, there are not a few things in which the public good demands a certain measure of uniformity of action. In London the cab driver must turn to the left, in New York to the right. No man can escape the necessity of obeying many statutory requirements; no man who desires the welfare of the community, to say nothing of his own, will wish to escape. The freedom of the Christian man means not disregard of the law of the land, or of any of the things for which love to one's neighbor calls; but, on the one hand, a joyous doing of these things because they are the natural expressions of the life-principle of love, and on the other, freedom from bondage to any statutes handed down from ancient times which, however useful in the past, no longer serve the interests of mankind.

But there is a more fundamental element in our question, whether the life of faith working through love is practicable today. It is respecting the element of faith and the possibility of a real fellowship of the human soul with God, that in many minds the gravest doubt will arise. Few earnest-minded men will question that we ought to love our fellow-men, or that a life devoted to the welfare of the community is both possible and ennobling. But can such a life of service to men find its source and spring in a conscious, joyous, fellowship with God? This question touches, of course, the deepest, most vital element of Paul's conception. Losing this, we lose the very heart of that type of life of which we have been speaking.

Is then the life of faith, the life of the Spirit, the fellowship of the human soul with the eternal Spirit of Christ, really possible? Let us remind ourselves that we are not speaking of visions and revelations. These entered into Paul's experience; but they are

not of the essence of the life of the Spirit. Nor do we mean the surrender of the soul to vague impressions, though these be dignified by the title, "voices of the Spirit." The life of faith rests not on these, but on the firm conviction that God is, and that to the soul that desires to know his thought and to do his will, and is ready to employ all the powers of the mind in the effort to learn that thought and will, he is a God that reveals himself. Through ancient Scripture and the example of the Christ; through counsel of parent, friend, and teacher; in the response of one's own best and deepest self to the call of circumstance and opportunity, the revelation comes. The invisible things of God are perceived through the things that are made, and the duty of the individual is discoverable through the interpretation of the events that happen about him and to him. So it was with Paul, so it is with every soul that will receive the revelation thus made. The sensualist suppresses it; the rebellious man defies it; the wilful man perverts it; the ill-balanced mind, longing for the visible vision and the audible revelation, distorts it even at times into a very voice of Satan; but to every soul it comes, and the sober, earnest soul finds in it the guide of life. And not only guidance, but power, also; for he who is led by the Spirit, also lives by the Spirit, and in his life there appears the fruit of the Spirit.

"As many as are led by the Spirit of God these are sons of God," and to be led by the Spirit of God is not impossible. Mysterious it may be, as all the great things of life are mysterious. But throughout the centuries, before the coming of the Christ and since, multitudes of men and women have lived the life of faith and found its fruit to be love, joy, and peace. Our interpretation of the experience, the language in which we describe it, may vary, and, what is more significant, may react to modify the type of the experience itself; but the experience is real, and the effects of it in life are unmistakable. Faith works through love. Christian morality has its roots in religion; and the religion of faith bears its fruit in love. To this truth, so tersely expressed by Paul, so thoroughly attested in centuries of experience, this practical age needs supremely to give heed.